

Northstar COO not planning major changes in initial season

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – Driving into Northstar-at-Tahoe and schussing down the slopes it doesn't seem like anything is different. For now, the experience is the same.

But with Vail Resorts buying the North Shore resort in October and Bill Rock coming on board in December as chief operating officer, change is inevitable.

The first noticeable change will be this month when Northstar starts serving the Epic Burger – which sounds like a Big Mac based on the description on Vail's website as “two fresh Angus quarter pound patties, lettuce, tomato, onion, pickle, organic white cheddar cheese, and a special sauce.”



Bill Rock has been at the helm of Northstar-at-Tahoe for a month.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Other dining changes will be assessed as all the players become more familiar with one another.

All the employees have been retained, with some of the mountain hosts becoming full-time workers.

Jessica Van Pernis, communications manager for Northstar, said, "The Vail team was surprised how lean we were."

In regards to staffing, Rock said, "There may be structural changes down the road."

Vail also owns Heavenly Mountain Resort on the South Shore, so it's possible some blending of resources in Tahoe may occur besides the extra help that is in Colorado.

The man in charge

Rock, who with his wife and twin 5-year-old son and daughter moved to Truckee in early December, is in observation mode at the resort.

His kids are eager to ski in Lake Tahoe. Each got in 25 days of skiing last season.

Rock said his daughter was ecstatic to be moving to California – already having a sense of style at a young age. And only after a couple laps around the outdoor ice rink in the village she apparently is a natural on skates.

Until moving here from West Virginia the only Tahoe area resort Rock had skied was Kirkwood. He had been to Squaw in the summer.

He quickly went all over Mount Pluto – Northstar's mountain with its summit of 8,600 feet.

"This mountain is laid out well. My first day it was easy to figure out," Rock said during a wide-ranging interview with *Lake Tahoe News*.

Dressed in his gray Northstar jacket Rock doesn't look like a corporate executive. With a radiant smile, he jokes about probably not needing another cup of coffee, but he opts for java instead of the alcohol that is being poured at the bar in the pub at the Northstar Village.

He seems energized by the prospect of taking over a mountain much larger than where he came from in West Virginia or in Durango.

But similarities abound between the resorts he's worked at – one being experience with homeowners.

The first month he spent mostly getting to know the mountain and employees. With the holidays behind him, Rock plans to reach out to the community this month.

Addressing issues

It's Dec. 27 and the parking lot is full. Parking is one of the problems skiers and riders have with Northstar. Rock said recent surveys of guests show less frustration with parking, but he said there is room for more improvement.

"We know where we fall short. There are days like today where people will not get the experience of a lifetime," Rock said. "Sometimes it's hard to find a place to park and sometimes it's hard to find a place to eat. We will address it for next year."

There was a time when Northstar restricted the number of skiers allowed on the mountain. That has not happened for at least five years. Rock isn't sure quotas would be reintroduced.

For now, Rock said, "We are dedicated to providing the experience of a lifetime for guests."

LTN asked how that is possible when Northstar seems to be struggling with its identity because it used to be a laid back

family-friendly resort before it tried transforming itself with a village like other resorts, and eventually had a Ritz-Carlton open mid-mountain in December 2009.

“We are going to be a place for people to connect,” Rock said. “They create their own memories.”

He said Northstar caters to everyone. With lodging that runs the gamut from hotel-like offerings to studios to the Ritz, he said it’s possible to be all things to all people.

It’s also possible on the mountain, Rock said, with what he described as a world-class terrain park, and a variety of skiable acreage for all levels.

Besides being a ski resort, Northstar has a well-known mountain bike park that for the last few years has been host to the national collegiate championships.

In May, the resort is the end point for the first stage of the Amgen Tour de California road bike race that starts in South Lake Tahoe.

Rock is looking forward to getting out on his bike. The 42-year-old used to do some racing – including as a triathlete.